

Unlocking the Political Potential of Garo Women in Meghalaya: Aligning with the Vision of Viksit Bharat @2047

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Abstract:

Meghalaya lacks a social structure, untouchability, and a caste system. Although women are highly regarded in the matrilineal society, there remains a shortage of female political participation. Women did not have all the opportunities in society, and in most of the household decision-making and political empowerment, Garo women are still lacking. This study aims to investigate the political empowerment of the Garo Women in Meghalaya. It also tries to examine the matrilineal system of Garo Hills and the status of Garo women in the society, and tries to look at the political participation of women in Meghalaya and the challenges they face. This paper also studies the impact of gender inequality as a hindrance to reaching the goal of Viksit Bharat @2047. It also consists the suggestions and alleviates inequalities of women in the politics and to contribute the women towards Viksit Bharat@2047.

Keywords: *Meghalaya, Garo Women, Political Participation, Indian Constitution, Gender equality, Viksit Bharat @2047.*

Introduction:

In every aspect of society, women make a significant contribution. In India, women actively work in agriculture, animal husbandry, and household tasks, and they play a major role in contributing to every part of society. Women have all along been active partners in farming and undertake management activities with men. Besides, these women have also participated in politics.

Viksit Bharat:

The goal of Viksit Bharat @ 2047 is to make the nation a developed nation by the time it celebrates its 100th anniversary of independence in 2047. The main objectives of the Viksit Bharat are Yuva (Youth),

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Garib (poor), Mahilayen (Women) and Annadata (Farmers). Viksit Bharat works on social welfare and guarantees that everyone can gain economic advancement. The administration has started several historic projects to strengthen marginalised areas, assist underprivileged populations, and improve social security, healthcare, and education.

Initiatives like Pradhan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and Ayushman Bharat. The government is committed to improving access to healthcare, financial inclusion, sanitation, and gender parity. PM Modi hopes to create a more equitable and inclusive society in which everyone can thrive, and he achieves this by giving social welfare more weight. (Agarwal et al., n.d.)

Meghalaya:

Meghalaya is a state in the northeastern part of India. The state of Meghalaya is the homeland of three tribes Garo, the Khasi, and the Jaintia. The three tribes follow the matrilineal system, and the lineage and inheritance of properties are traced through the mother's line. The properties are passed on to the youngest daughter, and the man who marries the youngest daughter of the family must look after the in-laws, and the youngest daughter and her husband enjoy a respected position in the family and also in society. This makes the culture of Meghalaya state unique among all the parts of Indian culture. However, this does not change women into having greater decision-making power for women in public life. Women in Meghalaya are often admired and valued in the family and community. However, their roles in political and administrative spheres remain significantly limited. In the administrative council of the village, women see very less men; women are dominant, and women's voices are often absent or underrepresented. Although women are the backbone of the matrilineal system, they are often excluded from the position of authority in the village's council. This shows that women may inherit the property and carry the family name; however, they are still sidelined when it comes to participating in governance or shaping public policy.

The Garo Tribe:

The term "Garo" refers to a specific group of people commonly referred to as the "Garos," whose population is centred in the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The Garos are also one of the racial elements that make up the majority population of north-east India, which includes West Bengal and Bangladesh.

The Garo tribe is divided into several divisions based on their geographic location inside the Garo Hills. There are also linguistic distinctions between the Garo tribes, with some Garo words being incomprehensible to other Garo communities.



Traditionally Garo tribe has been divided into 11 groups and they are A•we, Chisak, Dual, Matchis, Matabeng, Ambeng, Chibok, Ruga, Gara-Ganching, A•tong, and the Megams. In the Garos tribe, the clan or exogamous sept is known as chatchi or Katchi. Originally there were two main clans Sangma and Marak. However, Momin, Shira, and Areng were also added to the present context. (S. M. Sangma, 1981)

73rd Amendment Act and Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India: Framework for local governance and its policy towards Women:

Panchayats have always played a significant role in rural Indian society. India is a rural country. Over 80% of the people there reside in villages. During the lengthy era of foreign control, the Panchayati Raj system in India remained in one form or another; nevertheless, a few changes were made to its conventional structure. India's government was obligated to include all the villages within the democratic structure as soon as it gained independence. Although Meghalaya does not have a Panchayati Raj system, the traditional tribal group, village, and societal institutions are deeply ingrained.

Traditional Socio-Political System:

Since ancient times, the people of Meghalaya have maintained their unique traditional socio-political structure. The three tribes, Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia, have their traditional political structure. At the village level, they have self-governing institutions that operate quite democratically from the ground up. According to custom, the traditional chiefs of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are the Syiem, Lyngdoh, Sirdar, Wahadadar, Doloi, Pator, and the Rangbah shnong, or Syiemship, Elaka, and villages. Traditional councils hold the highest authority and are crucial to the administration and decision-making process. In the Garo Hills, the Garo tribe has two traditional institutions and two Nokma: A•king Nokma (land owner) and Village Nokma. However, the Nokma does not have absolute power over all the decisions made by a joint assembly of the village elders. These conventional institutions greatly influence the socio-economic and political lives of the people of Meghalaya

Women in Garo Society:

Women held a great status and were treated with great respect in the Garo tribe. Everything in the home is owned exclusively by the mother of the household. The youngest daughter in the family obtains the property by default. Unless another daughter is specifically named by her parents, she is subsequently given the name 'Nokna', which means "the house" or "home." The Nokna's spouse is granted paternal authority in their home, and together they constitute the "Nokkrom" of the family and the Nokna's spouse is positioned



next to his father-in-law, whom he succeeds in the afterlife. The spouse is also given full responsibility for all family matters in the household. However, if the family is the Nokma, which is the head of the village, the Nokkrom of the family becomes the Nokma automatically.

The Nokma holds his position by virtue of the A• King's right, which is essentially his wife's and her clan's. From the perspective of the Garo organisation, the Nokma office is fundamentally important. It serves as the hub of the village's organisation and is the thread that connects all of Garo society. The Nokma leads the way as the focal point of village life and serves as the hamlet's external representative. (S. M. Sangma, 1981).

Though the Garo women inherit the property and the Nokma, they do not play a significant role in the village council. The husband presides over the village council; women are not involved in making decisions.

Women in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly from 1972 to the 2023 Election:

Since the Creation of Meghalaya, the members of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly have still been lacking. In people's views on politics, women are considered incapable of contesting or joining in politics; as a result, women are still lacking in politics. The first general election in Meghalaya saw women from the Khasi Hills, including Miss Silverene Swer, Mrs Muriel, S. Dunn, Mrs P.S. Marbaniang, Maysalin War, Louisiana Brosila Lamin, and from the Garo Hills, Miriam D. Shira, Percylina Marak, and H.B. Sangma, come forward to contest the elections. However, there is only one woman who got elected in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, that is Percylina Marak (Lyngdoh, 2024)

In Meghalaya, you will see women working hard as a vegetable vendor, fish seller, food stall owner, clothes seller, and in a Petrol Pump, etc. But you will not find women in the Village council and as political leaders. Being a matrilineal society where women are highly respected and hold the highest positions, there is still a lack of women participating or getting equal opportunities in politics. A few women who are interested in politics need to face lots of challenges. It is not easy for a normal woman from a normal family to contest elections though she is interested in politics and capable. Either the women who is going to contest elections has to come from a political background or a rich family. The women who are educated and capable and wants to join politics needs to face extra challenges.



Autonomous District Council of Garo Hills, Meghalaya:

The entire Meghalaya is covered under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to safeguard the culture and preserve the autonomy of the tribal people of Meghalaya. Their primary goals are to preserve the rich culture and customs of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya, the Autonomous District Council has been functioning for more than 52 years. The history of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council is rich and spans from the mid-1800s to the Republic Day of India on January 26, 1950, when the Indian Constitution was entrusted to the people. The subterranean regions of the Garo Hills were ruled despotically by the mighty Zamindars during the time leading up to the adoption of Regulation X in 1822. (Marak, 2012)

The district headquarters, Tura, hosted the official opening of the first Garo Hills Autonomous District Council on April 14, 1952, by the then-Assamese Chief Minister, Shri Bishnuram Medhi. The 30 members of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council operate as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the state government, making it a smaller version of the latter (M. S. Sangma, 2012).

According to the District Council of Garo Hills, there are no such rules and regulations for women not to be members of the district council. However, women are lacking as the members of district council. Since Meghalaya is separated from Assam and has got its own state, women's participation in the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) is found to be very less in fact, only one woman has been elected as a member of the District Council to date that is Sadhiarani M Sangma from the Dengnakpara constitution and serve as two terms as an MDC in the GHADC. The participation of women in the GHADC remains sparse compared to men.

Impact of Viksit Bharat @2047 on Gender Equality in Meghalaya:

Gender equality is a major issue all over the world and in India. Though there are many laws at both constitutional and statutory levels in India on gender equality. Yet women did not get equal opportunity in society. In Meghalaya where matrilineal is followed in the society where women are highly respected, but when it comes to decision-making in the village council and political participation, women do not get equal opportunities. Women still face challenges and discrimination in the society when it comes the decision-making, and in politics. The goal of Viksit Bharat @2047 is to transform and develop a self-reliant and prosperous nation by the time it reaches its 100th anniversary of Indian independence. The question is whether women will get equal opportunity by the time it is the 100th anniversary, as in India, gender inequality still exists, despite there is an improvement in the economic, healthcare, work, politics, education, and social roles. The imbalance may hinder the country's progress in many areas.



- The women from Garo Hills need to build their own confidence and transform their mindsets; they should not fear or lack confidence that they are not capable of leading the society or joining politics. Garo women should come out of their comfort zone and start with self-awareness and confidence-building programs, leadership workshops, and role model engagement.
- Women's needs need to be prioritized to close the gap and promote growth, educational initiatives. There is a need to launch the mobile education units and community learning centers in the rural areas to overcome the geographical barriers.
- Women should have economic independence and a strong precursor to political participation. When women become economically independent, it is easy to participate more actively in decision-making and in politics.

Conclusion:

The goal of Viksit Bharat @2047 is to build the nation and bring development. Empowering women is also the larger national goal of the Viksit Bharat @2047; women should be empowered in all aspects. However, women are still facing a lot of challenges in society, including inequality. In Meghalaya, where matrilineal is practiced. However, when it comes to decision-making in the house or in society or in participating in politics, women are still dominated by men. To bring the change in women's lives community needs to focus and efforts and work to close the gap. Garo women themselves need to make significant contributions to the advancement of gender equality and the development of their society by raising their level of political participation in politics.



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